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Trying out tradition

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A YEAR PRIOR TO BEGINNING AT IOWA STATE, I VISITED A FRIEND ON THE CAMPUS TO WARM UP TO THE ATMOSPHERE AND DIP MY TOES INTO WHAT WOULD END UP BEING THE MOST DRAMATIC SHIFT IN MY LIFE UP TO THAT POINT. MY FRIEND SPRINKLED INFORMATION ABOUT IOWA STATE-SPECIFIC TRADITIONS THROUGHOUT THE DAY, AND THE IMAGERY OF THE ZODIAC, STUDENTS RESTING IN HAMMOCKS HANGING BETWEEN TREES, AND PARTICULARLY THE CAMPANILE AND ITS RESOUNDING BELL WERE SINGED INTO MY MIND.

JUMP FORWARD TO THE PRESENT, AND I AM ROUNDING OUT MY FOUR YEARS AS A COLLEGE STUDENT HERE AND THE TRADITIONS THAT MARK THE EXISTENCE OF ANY SOCIALLY-CONSCIOUS STUDENT HAVE NOT BUDGED, EXCEPT THE TERMINATION OF VEISHEA — STILL A SORE SPOT FOR SOME WHO GOT A TASTE OF IT FRESHMAN YEAR BEFORE IT WAS STRIPPED AWAY FROM US. PERSONALLY, ITS CANCELLATION ELICITED PERHAPS A SHRUG OF THE SHOULDERS AND A MEEK "THAT'S TOO BAD."

I HAVE LARGELY AVOIDED PARTICIPATING IN ANYTHING THAT WOULD CALCIFY A CYCLONE IDENTITY AROUND MYSELF, SINCE SCHOOL PRIDE HAS NEVER BEEN A FEATURE OF MY PERSONALITY.

I never walk around the zodiac, instead I dart right on top of it, taking pleasure in stomping the snow off my boots on the taurus, my astrological sign, and my test scores have not sunk to failure territory in response. Also, the super dog seems fine in theory, a smashing together of recipes that individually satisfy, but in performance during a drunken haze, the super dog ultimately underwhelms and the line is always too long anyways.

The crowning tradition that sparks most chatter and is probably first what comes to mind when the word 'traditions' secedes 'Iowa State' is, of course, the Curtiss to Beardshear Run. For those who have been prevailing under a rock in between classes, the run is when a student bolts from Curtiss to Beardshear, in the buff, all loose parts a-jangling across Central Campus. Usually this is accomplished in the middle of the night and in small packs, as to avoid gawking onlookers. Also, I have heard a handful of secondhand accounts where the naked miscreant is tackled by the Iowa State police because public nudity at night is very bad for some reason. I am skeptical though — it's the tackle that feels like fabrication.

My first encounter with the Curtiss to Beardshear Run was sophomore year, around 11 p.m. one night, when a boy had invited me to lay with him on Central Campus to talk. A small group had formed outside Curtiss and their giggles filled the night air — soon enough the clothes came flying off and they sprinted across the grass. They had planned it as I assume most participants do, by having garments on the other side so they can clothe immediately and avoid any embarrassment. It looked like a bonding exercise, as being naked with friends always is.

As I have made abundantly clear, I never intend to participate in tradition, edging on rather actively despising their very existence. So my decision to move forward with the Curtiss to Beardshear Run is confusing, even to me. Blame could probably be cited to the tantalizing aspect of public nudity that does excite, and also to the inherently disrespectful nature it has to the university. Out of the gate, I knew I wanted this to be a solo operation, bringing only a sole friend who could act as a runaway drive of sorts, but even now I am not sure what she could have done except scream that men in uniform were embarking on me.

Timing was important, since I wanted it to be comfortable, weather wise, and with 0.01 percent of being caught, I had to patiently wait for a beautiful day that would turn into a chilly, but warm enough night — and the hour could be precisely 2:30 a.m. 2:00 a.m. being unsafe for potential library dwellers and 3:00 a.m. being too late for potential early risers who do whatever early risers do in their perfectly structured lives. As for attire, sweatpants and a sweatshirt, obviously. Underwear? A prospective obstruction. Quick strip and quick dress is crucial.

Finding parking on campus at 2:30 a.m. is surprisingly easy.

"THIS IS STUPID," MY FRIEND SAYS WHILE SHE PULLS INTO A SPOT, "I COULD BE WITH MY DOG RIGHT NOW AND YOU'RE DRAGGING ME TO DO THIS." MY FRIEND AND I SHARE A CYNICISM TOWARD CYCLONE CULTURE. WE GET OUT OF THE CAR AND TO MAKE OUR WAY TO CURTISS, SHE COOLLY CONFIDENT, ME VISIBLY NERVOUS.

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Part of me had imagined this is why she tagged along, since the first time she absentmindedly took her bra off in front of me how many years ago she has vowed to see me naked before we die. Naturally, I was too shy to set an official date for my body unveiling, but also ‘before we die’ is more conceptual than literal, so whenever she brings it up I say ‘of course you will’ to bury the topic, but it looks like her wish will be granted long before death.

We decide to split up, she takes my phone because I am afraid I will drop it on my run. She positions herself by Beardshear. More than anything, I miss those few minutes without my phone and channel that longing into encouragement to speedily shred off my outfit and wrap my arms around my beloved device. With my sweatpants and sweatshirt tucked under my arm, I bulleted toward Beardshear, imagining my start kicking up a cloud of dust in the style of Road Runner.

I’ll spare most details of how running topnotch without a supporting mechanism in place does have a foreign sensation on genitalia, and I was taking larger sprinter-esque strides than I normally do when jogging, obviously, so that is a factor.
The stretch between the two buildings is short and the event is mostly a blip in my memory, but I do remember upon reaching Beardshear I dressed faster than any costume change I’ve had backstage.

I am supposed to envy those confident enough to stand proudly in their birthday suit because apparently it’s honorable to love yourself, which baffles me. “How was it?” my friend asks me. I respond “I feel the same.” It was like in the movies after the young girl loses her virginity then stares at her reflection in the mirror searching for evidence of a changed woman, but ultimately the transformation is moot.

The run and all Iowa State traditions are emblematic of how college is supposed to be a bank full of memories with friends and fun, punctuated with trademarks of Cyclonism. And the hope is that when you graduate, along with your diploma you’ll be rich with these recollections, proud to exalt the soul of cardinal and gold. After fleeing from Ames, if this is the measures of wealth, I will be bankrupt, with this Beardshear run memory and all the rest of the traditions near and dear to Cyclone’s alike converting to nickels and dimes.